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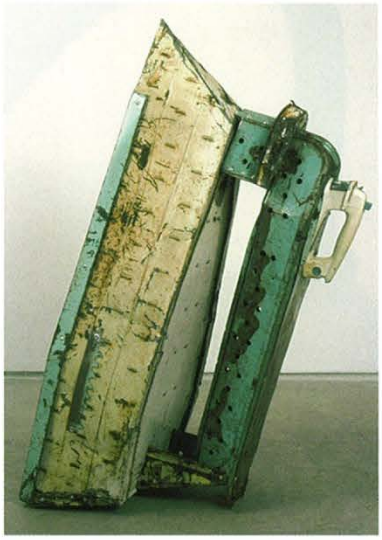
Willie Cole Kiki Smith Jaume Plensa

The Other Side



Willie Cole

BY REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN

Willie Cole creates elegant artworks that challenge prevailing ideas of identity and perception. His combination of visually seductive materials and witty humor serves to temper his serious and sometimes difficult subject matter. In his deft hands, discarded domestic items are transformed into mythical figures and objects that carry poignant commentaries within their iconographic arrangements.

Now at a crucial point in his career, Cole is garnering serious national attention and critical appraisal in a series of important exhibitions. New sculptures and prints by the artist were on view in January 2006 at Alexander and Bonin Gallery in New York. "Afterburn," an exhibition of selected works from 1997 to 2004 organized by Susan Moldenhauer, began a six-venue tour across the United States in 2005. A second traveling exhibition curated by Patterson Simms opens at the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey in March 2006.

The surveys, in particular, expose the linear threads that run through Cole's work. The household iron, for example, is an object he has returned to again and again. Since his first sculpture of a crushed iron in 1988, Cole has explored the utilitarian object from different angles, always coming up with new and interesting ways to exploit its implied references.

Left: *Branded Irons*, 2000. 4 scorched plywood panels, 84 x 84 in. Above: *Mother and Child*, 2002. Steel and plastic, 34.5 x 24.5 x 15 in.

Chewa 600, 1997. Bamboo, wood, jute, and straw, 40 x 61 x 30 in.

Some of his earliest experiments involved using the steam iron as a tool to make works. His "paintings" on canvas and wood are created by scorching the surface with a steam iron. Cole arranges the burns in repeating geometric patterns to form pleasing images. Yet their critical overtones are indicated in titles such as *Lost Soles* or *Branded Irons*, which evoke references to the permanent scarring caused by slavery, as well as corporate branding.

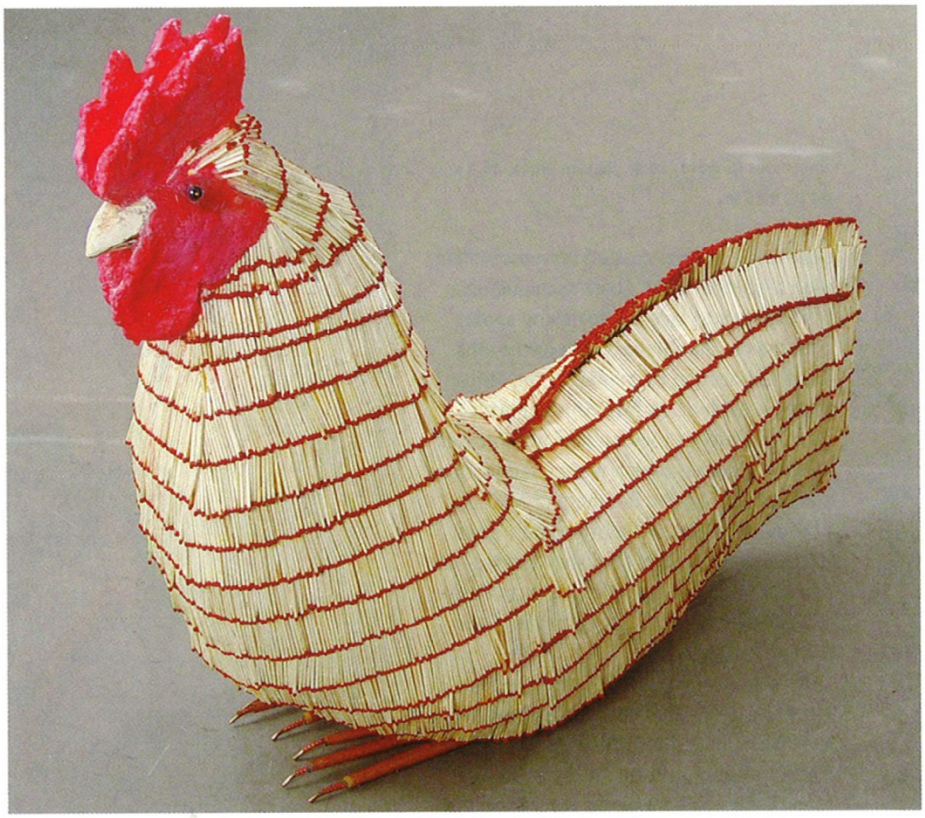
Some of Cole's other iron works contain more literal references, such as his large woodblock print *Stowage* (1997). In the center of the large page is the outline of an ironing board. Adorned with lines of dots, the image takes on the look of black and white diagrams displaying the inhumane way that captured Africans were transported within the hold of a ship. Around this, Cole cut the wood block and inserted 12 actual irons of different makes and models. When printed, the irons' different steam hole configurations form distinctive designs, as if representing the shields of various tribes taken into captivity.

Cole has also made numerous sculptures that emulate or derive from irons. He has dissected heaps of discarded models, reassembling their various bits and pieces into Erector Set-like figures such as *Perm-Press (hybrid)* (1999). In *Chewa 600* (1997), *600%*, and *Mother and Child* (2002), he fabricated massive versions of the household item, some enlarged as much as 600 times their original size. *Steaming Hot* (1999) takes a distinctively different tone, fitting a standing iron with feathers to appropriate the look of steam escaping from its base. Another series explores the uncanny resemblance between various irons and tribal masks.

To appreciate how one object can hold such interest after more than 15 years, it is helpful to understand Cole's conceptual process. He rarely makes sketches; instead, he generates word lists that pertain to a particular item. For example, his word list for a steam iron begins with "iron." The next words may visually describe what he sees, reducing the black handle and silver body to "black" and "silver." The shape may suggest the words "shield" and "mask." Then he'll consider what is not there, such as "heat," "fire," and "steam." Each time he handles the object and perceives something different, he'll add a reference to the list, which usually hangs on his studio wall. "With a long list," Cole explains, "I can make work that speaks about that object forever because I'm speaking about it from so many points of view."

Words have always been an important inspiration for Cole: "My great grandfather had a library full of illustrated children's books, and I spent hours reading them and copying the illustrations." The experience came in handy in the 1970s when he worked as a freelance illustrator and writer. He quit in 1983 to become a full-time artist but, as he explains, "The words and images always come together."

The connection is particularly apparent in Cole's titles. He admits that his witty and often wry choices can be "evocative, and they turn the key a little bit for the person seeing the work." Often these hints are necessary. In 2004, Cole created a series of near life-size chickens with feathers made from overlapping matchsticks. The title, *Malcolm's Chickens*, is the clue to understanding the incendiary works, which were inspired by a comment made by Malcolm X following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in which he intoned that the event smacked of "chickens coming home to roost." "Sometimes the language is so encoded that a person still might not get it, but they'll wonder about it," Cole admits. "Like *To Get to the Other Side*. It seems logical to me that it's the answer



Top: *Malcolm's Chickens III*, 2004. Styrofoam, matches, wood, wax, copper, and marbles, 32.5 x 13 x 40 in. Bottom: *To Get to the Other Side*, 2001. View of installation at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, NY.

to a question, so now that you know that, you can begin to put the puzzle together."

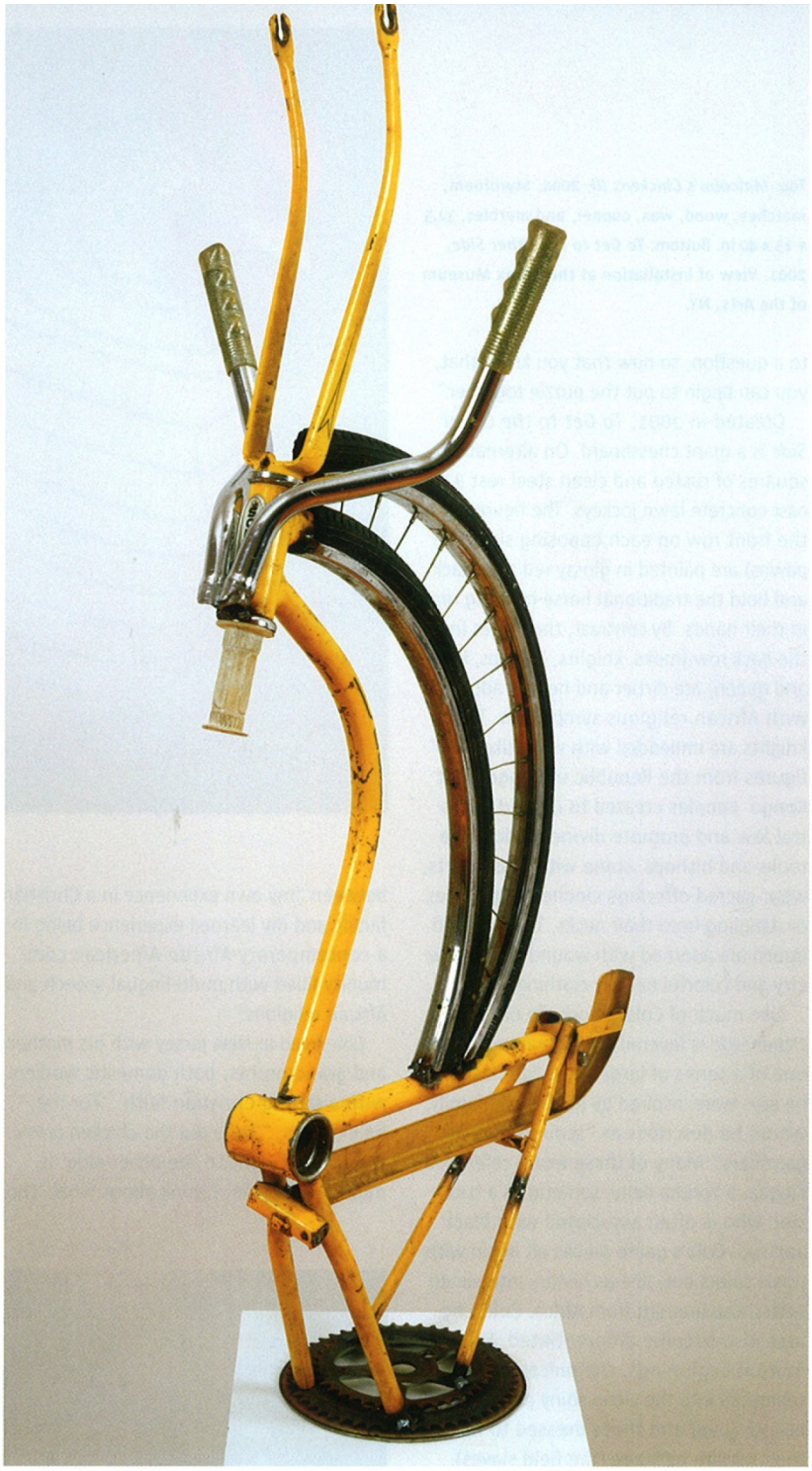
Created in 2001, *To Get to the Other Side* is a giant chessboard. On alternating squares of rusted and clean steel rest 32 cast concrete lawn jockeys. The figures in the front row on each opposing side (the pawns) are painted in glossy red and black and hold the traditional horse-hitching ring in their hands. By contrast, the pieces in the back row (rooks, knights, bishops, king, and queen) are dirtier and heavily adorned with African religious symbolism. The knights are imbedded with nails, like *Nkisi* figures from the Republic of Congo that Kongo peoples created to uphold ancestral law and promote divine justice. The rooks and bishops, some with grass skirts, wear sacred offerings cinched in pouches or dangling from their necks. The king and queen are adorned with wound copper jewelry and colorful necktie clothing.

Like much of Cole's work, *To Get to the Other Side* is layered with meaning. It is one of a series of large-scale "games" that he says were inspired by his father's family, whom he describes as "scoundrels and gamblers." Many of these works reference Elegba, a Yoruba deity, sometimes a trickster, who is often associated with black and red. Cole's game pieces all begin with those colors but, just as history intervened with those brought from Africa, Cole's figures also become differentiated. From mutual beginnings, the pieces become separated into the clean shiny pawns (the house slave) and those dressed to honor their African heritage (the field slaves).

Beyond the historical references, many works allude to Cole's personal experiences. He grew up between the sleepy suburb of Summerville, New Jersey, and the city of Newark, which in the '60s and '70s was a hotbed of cultural activity. Although it takes only 30 minutes to drive from one to the other, Cole often felt that the two places were worlds apart. This piece, he acknowledges, comes out of shuttling between "my own experience in a Christian family and my learned experience being in a contemporary African American community filled with multi-lingual speech and African religions."

Cole lived in New Jersey with his mother and grandmother, both domestic workers with a strong Christian faith. "For me," he explains, "'Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side' is more than a joke. I think about what 'the other side' means. In this world, the other side is the spiritual world. And what does a chicken have to do with the other side? For some people it is just a clever title, they don't understand the deeper meaning."

To truly understand the intricacies of Cole's pieces, a road map is often necessary. Fortunately, his works are so visually strong that is not necessary to plumb their depths to enjoy them. A good example is a



Speedster tji wara, 2002. Bicycle parts, 46.5 x 22.25 x 15 in.

series of sculptures created from assembled bicycle parts in 2002. Cole's manipulations turn seats into faces, wheels and spokes into manes, handlebars into horns. The visual connection to animals of the African plains is evident. In fact, the sculptures directly reference the antelope headdresses called *tji waras*, which were used in agricultural rites by the Bambara of Mali. To acknowledge the correlation, Cole gave each work a title that combined the type of bike used and its inspiration, such as *Pompton Schwinn tji wara*, *Pacific tji wara*, and *Speedster tji wara*.

A similar playfulness appears in two pieces made during Cole's residency at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in 2000. Given unlimited access to the porcelain manufacturer's factory, he assembled discarded faucets and plumbing fixtures into a pair of figures, *Abundance* and *Desire*. The first suggests a female figure wearing a skirt, her legs splayed in an inviting pose. Her male counterpart is similarly configured but endowed with a spigot that leaves no question as to his gender. Juxtaposed one against the other, the amusing sexual innuendos are unmistakable.

Both figures bear an uncanny resemblance to Ganesh, the elephant-headed son of the Hindu god Shiva. Cole acknowledges that the Kohler warehouse, where freshly baked toilets are stacked four or five high on pallets, reminded him of a marble-columned Hindu temple. "I carried [that feeling] back to the studio with me. The final sculptures evolved out of a subconscious process wherein I merely played with the fragments for five to 15 minutes at a time until something emerged." The art, religion, and imagery of Asia have long fascinated Cole. The Newark Museum has one of the largest collections of Tibetan art in the country. He studied Eastern religion and philosophy as an undergraduate at the School of Visual Arts in New York City and was a practicing Buddhist and yoga student for several years. "Worlds of Transformation: Tibetan Art of Wisdom and Compassion," a traveling exhibition that Cole saw in 2000, was particularly inspirational. His admiration for the paintings of Mahakala, the protector of Tibetan faith, can be seen in one of his newest series of works. In these assemblages, women's high-heeled shoes fit one inside the other to create patterns of color and shape that resemble the glowering eyes and fang-like teeth of this fierce god.

Like irons, shoes appear in Cole's work at various points in his career. In 1993, he experimented with men's shoes in *Winged Tipped Ibeje 1* and *2*, but found himself drawn to the complex references and construction of women's high-heels. Stacking them one on top of another, he created a series of female figures with provocative

Left: *Made in the Philippines II*, 1993. Shoes, PVC pipe, wood, and wheels, 39 x 44 x 44.5 in. Right: *Abundance*, 2000. Porcelain and metal fixtures, 16.5 x 19.5 x 12 in.

titles such as *Screaming Venus* and *Black Leather Venus with Gold Lips and Bows*. Most impressive, however, is *Made in the Philippines*, a series of throne-like chairs made from the same materials.

By using recycled objects as raw materials, Cole immediately imbues his work with a human presence. This subtle undertone is very important. His work is driven by a desire to connect the present with the past, and he constantly derives inspiration from the world around him. When Cole established his first studio in Newark, the city was undergoing a construction boom. He remembers that he "walked around with the phrase 'high tech primitive art' in my head," with the idea of making sculpture out of contemporary building materials. Most of his work during this period was made of galvanized steel strips, like the woven *High-Tech Security Jacket for Executives Only* (1988).

Not long afterward, his mantra changed to "archaeological ethnographic Dada." During this period, he "was finding things and creating a culture. Like archaeologists who find a pile of bones and put them together and people believe that it was a dinosaur." One of the first things he found was an abandoned factory filled with thousands of blue and white hairdryers. He brought them back to his studio and began to disassemble them. He made numerous works from them, but "the work that I probably feel best about," he recalls, "were the masks. I wanted to see how much variety I could find in an image using just that one object. I made seven or eight masks out of hairdryers, and each had its own personality."

Patterning and repetition play an important role in Cole's work. Sculptures such as *Wind Mask East* (1992) result from stacking, turning, and flipping the hairdryers this way and that as Cole pursues his self-admitted penchant toward symmetry. His arrangements exploit the diverse visual characteristics inherent in the dryers' construction to evoke a human-like visage.

Cole sees his work in the vein of perceptual engineering as described by Wilson Bryan Key in *Subliminal Seduction*. His hope is to "make people see in a way that they've never done before." His process requires that each piece be carefully and beautifully constructed. He has an extraordinary versatility with materials: he bends, weaves, solders, joins, paints, and adorns his work with amazing adroitness. But this visual prowess comes second to his ability to harness the conceptual meanings of his objects. He understands the underlying currents within such mundane things as irons, hairdryers, and matches and exploits them in his poignant titles. Once viewers get past the "aha!" moment of recognizing the unusual materials behind the images, they must confront strong, provocative ideas.

Many of the issues that Cole tackles easily fit within current conversations on history and identity. But this reading of his work may be too narrow. "I think that African American artists have spoken extensively, not exclusively, but extensively about spirituality in art and I'm still addressing that issue...I still think of myself as releasing the spirits from the objects, and I believe that they guide me. I believe that they exist, that it's not just conversation."

He also sees a similarity between his work and some of the contemporary work coming out of Asia. He acknowledges that the visual construction and underlying references are different, but he feels a certain kinship with the dark humor. "There are Asian artists who have sinister and cartoony imagery. I see the work that I'm doing in that vein."

Cole engages in a complex conversation. His interests are broad and far-reaching, but each serves as part of his ongoing exploration into his role in society and the world around him. "There is the original flow and then there are the tributaries, he explains, "but they're all going in the same direction."

Rebecca Dimling Cochran is a writer and curator living in Atlanta.